UNITED
NATIONS

E

Economic and Social
Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/CN.4/Sub.2/1991/18
27 June 1991

ENGLISH
Original: SPANISH

COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Sub-Commission on Prevention of
Discrimination and Protection
of Minorities
Forty-third session
Item 8 of the provisional agenda

THE REALIZATION OF ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

Method and plan of work for the study on human rights and extreme poverty

Report submitted by Mr. Eduardo Suesún Monroy,
expert appointed pursuant to Sub-Commission
decision 1990/119

INTRODUCTION

1. At its forty-sixth session, by resolution 1990/15, the Commission on Human Rights reaffirmed that extreme poverty and exclusion from society constituted a violation of human dignity and that urgent national and international action was required to eliminate them. In the same resolution, it requested the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, when giving attention to problems, policies and progressive measures relating to the more effective realization of economic, social and cultural rights, to examine the question of extreme poverty and exclusion of society in greater depth and to carry out a specific study on this question. By its decision 1990/119 adopted without a vote, the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities requested Mr. Eduardo Suescún Monroy to prepare, without financial implications, the method and plan of work for the study on human rights and extreme poverty requested by the Commission.

2. At its forty-seventh session, by resolution 1991/14, the Commission noted with satisfaction the Sub-Commission's decision and pointed out that effective action to promote the enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms required a better understanding of the causes of extreme poverty including those connected with the problems of development and its interaction with the enjoyment of human rights. The Commission also recommended that the Sub-Commission, when considering the method and plan of work for the study on human rights and extreme poverty, to give particular attention to the conditions in which the poorest themselves could convey their experience and so contribute to a better understanding of the harsh reality of their lives and its causes.

3. On 14 February 1991 the Commission on Human Rights was presented with a joint declaration signed by a large number of non-governmental organizations, insisting that the study should be carried out with the participation of people and families living in extreme poverty.

4. At its recent sessions the Sub-Commission has considered the problem of extreme poverty under the item on the realization of economic, social and cultural rights; Mr. Danilo Türk had produced two reports on this subject (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1989/19 and E/CN.4/Sub.2/1990/19). Experts, Governments and non-governmental organizations have taken part in the Sub-Commission's discussions; among the NGOs, International Movement ATD Fourth World, whose founder, Father Joseph Wresinski, first proposed the subject for consideration by the Commission in February 1987, has always been prominent.

5. The history of human rights is the great story of man's struggle to win freedom and affirm his own dignity. At the international level, human rights were proclaimed as such in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in San Francisco in December 1948.

6. In practice, human rights have had a very varied history. Cultural, economic, political and social factors have promoted or hindered their exercise. In order to gain an accurate knowledge of the extent to which human rights are enjoyed, therefore, the actual situations in which they are intended to apply must be considered in context. If the aim is to analyse the interaction between human rights and poverty, the first thing to do is to study poverty: where it is found, how widespread it is, what forms it takes and what causes it; then the interaction between poverty and the enjoyment of human rights can be studied, leading to a true understanding of the extent to which human rights are respected or denied and ultimately to suggestions for possible ways of dealing with the crisis.

7. This is the course this study will follow, taking into account the extensive literature on poverty and the research material gathered directly by specialzed non-governmental organizations and universities, while always giving prominence to development indicators and surveys or other means of obtaining a more direct understanding of the enjoyment of human rights by the poor.

I. EXISTENCE, SCOPE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF POVERTY AND ABSOLUTE POVERTY

8. Poverty persists or is re-emerging in various parts of the world regardless of continent, ideology or race. It is a phenomenon that is unworthy of modern society, and one which has not been combated efficiently. To be clear about what needs to be done to eliminate it, the scope and extent of the current state of poverty must be considered with particular reference to the past 10 years. These have been particularly difficult for sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, which experienced a sharp decline in income; 1/ for Eastern Europe, whose economic system collapsed around it; for southern Asia, bowed under the weight of half the world's poor; 2/ and for the "new poor" 3/ who emerged within the industrial splendour of western Europe and North America.

9. In 1985 there were 1,116 million poor people in developing countries - "poor" meaning unable to obtain food, clothing, housing and other basic necessities of life. It has been estimated that for $370 per year a person can provide himself with these essentials. Below this income level lies a wide band of poverty. While this figure gives us a valid basis for quantifying the phenomenon, we must remember that the very nature of poverty makes it a precarious exercise. In fact, poverty is not only a lack of means to satisfy measurable biological needs (food, clothing, housing, medicine) but a lack of means to satisfy social needs, such as those associated with acting as a member of society.

10. This second aspect of poverty is the human aspect proper, the one which makes poverty a social and not simply a biological phenomenon and the one most relevant to a study such as this which seeks to verify the enjoyment of human rights by the poor. Statistics may shed light on the visible face of poverty, but they cannot reveal all that poverty implies in accumulated frustration and suffering.

Extreme poverty

11. On the other hand, this wide band of poverty has an underside: extreme poverty, which is defined as the condition of those who are below an income level of $275 per year. These are the most downtrodden by hardship of all, whose opportunities to better their lot are obviously more limited. The number of people in this extreme situation is put at 633 million; their plight is especially grave in sub-Saharan Africa, India, southern Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, Latin America and China (see annexed tables).

12. Extreme poverty is not only the hardest part of the problem but the essential starting point for any efforts to combat poverty.

13. There will be those who will propose to take action only against poverty, because this is less difficult, but such efforts will be doomed to failure inasmuch as they will leave untouched the root of the problem, which is extreme poverty. This is not to say that efforts to study and treat the problem of poverty can be forgone, in favour of focusing on extreme poverty alone. This study will therefore propose to take up the entire subject of poverty, with obvious emphasis on the urgency and priority of addressing problems associated with extreme poverty.

II. CAUSES OF POVERTY

14. Like all social phenomena, poverty is a matter of cause and effect. The causes include the following:

(a) Underdevelopment and all that that entails - the vicious circle of backwardness, dependency, explosive population growth, a backward farming sector, illiteracy, lack of professional training, low living standards, low income, unemployment and technological backwardness; underdevelopment as an internal obstacle in countries stifled by their precarious living conditions and uncertain progress, and especially underdevelopment as an international obstacle, inasmuch as that misnomer, the "international order", hinders progress by means of the terms of trade, technology gaps and an unfortunate kind of international cooperation whose main outcome has been debt;

(b) The quagmire of greater backwardness than underdevelopment generally implies, in which some population groups are trapped: the acute and chronic backwardness found in indigenous areas of South America, for example, or some parts of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia;

(c) The economic adjustments forced on some developing countries by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund: for the sake of better organized domestic finances, large numbers of people have been thrust into poverty or the plight of the already poor has been made more difficult;

(d) Crises in national economies, such as those which have occurred in Eastern Europe; 4/

(e) Unequal income distribution, found in economies with very high income but defective mechanisms for sharing it (Kuwait, South Africa, Saudi Arabia);

(f) The societal imbalances in industrialized countries which reduce to poverty individuals and families who cannot escape from debt within established patterns;

(g) The lack of birth-control policies to slow the population explosion, which works against efforts to overcome underdevelopment and poverty; 5/

(h) Discrimination against women, inasmuch as not allowing women to perform the same social tasks as men makes poverty more acute;

(i) The lack of effective action to combat illiteracy, which makes it impossible for the poor to assert and exercise their rights;

(j) Ineffective government action and international cooperation, failing to attach due importance to the need to tackle as a matter of priority the factors which cause poverty. 6/

III. INTERACTION BETWEEN POVERTY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

15. In a society governed by the laws of the market-place, the poor are institutionally excluded and systematically discriminated against. Their economic, social and cultural deprivation and lack of influence push the poor daily closer to the margins of society. The exercise of human rights often requires purchasing power, which they do not have. Thus, they get further and further away from being able to acquire essential services or rights (education, housing, medicine, leisure).

16. Without question, the poor are the hardest-hit minority of our times, whatever continent they inhabit and whatever their Government's ideological colours. They are a minority dispossessed of the benefits of the land, society and the State, and by that token rendered unable to act and exercise their rights as others can. They are even dispossessed of their minority status.

17. To promote social progress and change it is therefore essential to analyse the manifold influences of poverty on human rights and civil liberties as set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Accordingly, this study will look generally at the various economic, social and cultural, civil and political rights in the poorest countries and population groups, emphasizing those most closely connected with the problem. These include, for example, the right to an adequate standard of living (art. 25); the right to have recourse to the courts (art. 10); the right to choose one's place of residence (art. 13); the right to found a family (art. 16); the right to work (art. 23); the right to education (art. 26); the right to social security (art. 22); and the right to freedom of expression in the public affairs of one's country (art. 21).

18. An attempt will also be made to identify a number of typical countries or population groups to be the subject of more detailed investigations, which would provide a clearer picture than that given by general statistics and data and help to identify a more concrete truth by means of inquiries, sampling and other social research procedures so as to ascertain what the poor themselves think about their most pressing needs.

IV. SOLUTIONS

A. Characteristics of the problem

19. Poverty is so complex and persistent that direct and far-reaching solutions are needed. Poverty is an anachronism unworthy of modern society, and all efforts must be directed to eradicating it in the shortest possible time. Hitherto it has escaped elimination because people expected it to simply disappear as a result of economic growth.

20. From now on it must be borne in mind that combating poverty is essential if democracy is to work properly and human rights are to be properly upheld. This new criterion should be the yardstick by which to judge the economic and social justice strategies currently being attempted, so as to make them more comprehensive and effective.

21. As regards the kind of solutions required, there are cases in which groups of the poor cannot be distinguished against the general background of poverty in the countries where they live. This clearly constitutes an international problem inasmuch as it exceeds the capacity of the individual countries to deal with it. In such cases, the remedy must - for the most part, at least - be international.

22. Countries with large economies or substantial revenues but also with pockets of poverty are a different case; there the problem needs to be dealt with internally, perhaps through a reorientation of the economy or a better system of income distribution.

23. In between there are many developing countries that still have wide bands of destitution. These will need both effective and systematic international cooperation and domestic economies with a social orientation.

24. In all cases, poverty represents a serious and anachronistic imbalance in society, on both national and international levels.

B. At the local and national level

25. States, as the entities primarily responsible for the social order, must organize themselves to tackle the problem of poverty directly by:

(a) Establishing and coordinating national and local policies directly geared toward eliminating and preventing poverty;

(b) Giving priority in their budgets to the struggle against poverty;

(c) Setting up national offices to guide and coordinate efforts under the previous two headings and to encourage cooperation by the public and non-governmental organizations.

C. At the international level

26. Poverty must be addressed at the international level as the nature of the problem requires and as suggested on various occasions by United Nations bodies. It should be tackled directly, systematically and as a matter of priority, so that by the turn of the century 7/ this disgrace to the human condition will no longer exist.

27. The Economic and Social Council, the World Bank, FAO, ILO, UNESCO, UNICEF and all the agencies within the United Nations system should plan their policies and programmes of activity with this objective in view. The industrialized countries need to offer the poorest countries effective support in the areas of trade and development, with the clear and stated purpose of eradicating poverty. International cooperation and technical assistance should be granted to foster rural development, the preservation of the environment, literacy, the creation of productive employment and professional training, and to give a boost to the dependent economies.

28. The United Nations should appoint a body to coordinate these activities for the period 1992-2000.

29. Arrangements should be made for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to be posted prominently in public places (town halls, water points, market-places) around the world to make the poor aware of and encourage them to stand up for their human rights.

D. Participation by the poor and society at large

30. In any action to eradicate poverty, the poor should have a leading role. Their contribution and that of the non-governmental organizations working to combat poverty will be crucial to the success of the undertaking.

31. Action committees should be formed nationally and locally to combat poverty; they should include not only representatives of society at large who are concerned with the matter but also representatives of the poor.

Notes

1/ "Between 1980 and 1986, per capita income [in Latin America] fell by 14 per cent, and per capita income growth in 1986 was barely as high as in 1976. Average incomes were set back by a decade, reducing dramatically purchasing power." La Erradicación de la Pobreza en America Latina y del Caribe: Posibilidad de Acción y Cooperación, Inter-American Economic and Social Council, Organization of American States, Washington D.C., 1988, p. 13.

2/ Cf. World Bank, World Development Report 1990 - Poverty, Washington D.C., 1990, p. 2.

3/ "In unspoken contrast to those they did not wish to call the 'old' or 'traditional' poor, it [the expression 'nouveaux pauvres'] designated persons or households who had never before been seen in welfare institutions and whom one would never have imagined finding there. Once ordinary members of society, they had been toppled, all at once or by degrees, by misfortune - very often in the form of unemployment - into inextricable situations." Antoine Lion et al., Pauvreté, progrès et developpement, UNESCO, 1990, p. 151.

4/ From 1978 to 1987, the headcount index (see table 1) for Poland increased from 9 per cent to 23 per cent, and for Yugoslavia from 17 per cent to 25 per cent, representing increases in the number of poor people of 5.3 million in Poland and 2 million in Yugoslavia. World Bank, op. cit., p. 43.

5/ In 1990, the birth rate and the fertility rate in Uganda were 57 per cent and 7.3 per cent respectively; in Tanzania, 50 per cent and 7.1 per cent; in Yemen, 51 per cent and 7.6 per cent; whereas in Singapore they were 16 per cent, and 1.8 per cent, and in Tunisia, 27 per cent and 3.4 per cent.

6/ "If one third of the aid currently given was allocated to priority human sectors, support for these sectors would be quadrupled. [...] Military spending by the developing countries has increased three times as fast as that of the industrialized countries." Human Development Report 1991, UNDP, May 1991.

7/ According to World Bank calculations, there will still be 750 million poor people in the developing countries in the year 2000. Op. cit., p. 5. "Despite these massive figures, the aggregate poverty gap - the transfer needed to lift everybody above the poverty line - was only 3 per cent of developing countries' total consumption." Ibid., p. 28.

Table 1. How much poverty is there in the developing countries? The situation in 1985

Region	Extremely poor			Poor (including extremely poor)			Social indicators		
	Number (millions)	Headcount index (per cent)	Poverty gap	Number (millions)	Headcount index (per cent)	Poverty gap	Under-five mortality (per thousand)	Life expectancy (years)	Net primary enrolment rate (per cent)
Sub-Saharan Africa	120	30	4	180	47	11	196	50	56
East Asia	120	9	0.4	280	20	1	96	67	96
China	80	8	1	210	20	3	58	69	93
South Asia	300	29	3	520	51	10	172	56	74
India	250	33	4	420	55	12	199	57	81
Eastern Europe	3	4	0.2	6	8	0.5	23	71	90
Middle East and North Africa	40	21	1	60	31	2	148	61	75
Latin America and the Caribbean	50	12	1	70	19	1	75	66	92
All developing countries	633	18	1	1 116	33	3	121	62	83

Source: Hill, Kenneth and Ann R. Pebley. 1988. "Levels, Trends and Patterns of Child Mortality in the Developing World". Prepared for the Workshop on Child Survival Programs: Issues for the 1990s, School of Hygiene and Public Health, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Md., 20-21 November. Processed. Ravallion, Martin, Gaurav Datt, Dominique van de Walle and Elaine K. Chan. "Quantifying the Magnitude and Severity of Absolute Poverty in the Developing World in the Mid-1980s". Hill and Pebley 1988, Ravallion and others (background paper), and United Nations and World Bank data 1989, as contained in W.B., op. cit., table 2.1.

Notes: (1) The poverty line in 1985 PPP dollars is $275 per capita a year for the extremely poor and $370 per capita a year for the poor.

(2) The headcount index is defined as the percentage of the population below the poverty line. The 95 per cent confidence intervals around the point estimates for the headcount indices are sub-Saharan Africa, 19, 76; East Asia, 21, 22; South Asia, 50, 53; Eastern Europe, 7, 10; Middle East and North Africa, 13, 51; Latin America and the Caribbean, 14, 30; and all developing countries, 28, 39.

(3) The poverty gap is defined as the aggregate income shortfall of the poor as a percentage of aggregate consumption. Under-five mortality rates are for 1980-1985, except for China and South Asia, where the period is 1975-1980.

Table 2. Changes in selected indicators of poverty

Country and period	Length of period (years)	Headcount index		Number of poor (millions)		Average income shortfall (per cent)	
		First year	Last year	First year	Last year	First year	Last year
Brazil (1960-80) a/ b/	20	50	21	36.1	25.4	46	41
Colombia (1971-88) a/	17	41	25	8.9	7.5	41	38
Costa Rica (1971-86) a/	15	45	24	0.8	0.6	40	44
India (1972-83)	11	54	43	311.4	315.0	31	28
Indonesia (1970-87)	17	58	17	67.9	30.0	37	17
Malaysia (1973-87) a/	14	37	15	4.1	2.2	40	24
Morocco (1970-84)	14	43	34	6.6	7.4	46	36
Pakistan (1962-84) a/ b/	22	54	23	26.5	21.3	39	26
Singapore (1972-82)	10	31	10	0.7	0.2	37	33
Sri Lanka (1963-82) a/	19	37	27	3.9	4.1	35	29
Thailand (1962-86) a/ b/	24	59	26	16.7	13.6	..	35

Source: World Bank, op. cit., table 3.3.

Note: This table uses country-specific poverty lines. Official or commonly used poverty lines have been used when available. In other cases the poverty line has been set at 30 per cent of mean income or expenditure. The range of poverty lines, expressed in terms of expenditure per household member and in PPP dollars, is approximately $300-$700 a year in 1985 except for Costa Rica ($960), Malaysia ($1,420), and Singapore ($860). Unless otherwise indicated, the table is based on expenditure per household member. The headcount index is the percentage of the population below the poverty line. The average income shortfall is the mean distance of consumption or income of the poor below the poverty line, as a proportion of the poverty line.

a/ Measures for this entry use income rather than expenditure.

b/ Measures for this entry are by household rather than by household member.